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Comments: Forest Supervisor Jewkes,

In the midst of this Coronavirus pandemic, commenting on the Forest Service scoping letter seems like a trivial matter by comparison to the challenges we collectively face. But this too will pass. I've read Neil's letter on behalf the Oregon High Desert Grotto very carefully and support all the points he makes. And yet I keep coming back to the prohibition and criminalization of digging in caves. For the purposes of this discussion, I am speaking only about digging in caves or on the surface for the purpose of opening cave passage for exploration, not excavation for uncovering archeological or paleontological resources. Also, I am speaking for myself personally, not as a representative for the grotto.

I believe, as most cavers do, that original exploration is a noble pursuit. We've all been told as children that the job of explorer has long passed. And I believed that premise sincerely until the day that I discovered cave exploring. What a joy to discover that they were all wrong. Yet here we now confront a Forest Service that is prepared to treat cave exploration exactly the same as cave vandalism, a serious crime that has, as a friend recently put it, very scary legal teeth. We are talking felony and jail time here. Are we as a community of cave explorers prepared to accept this without challenge or clarification from the Forest Service?

The argument against raising this issue in the response to the scoping letter is that we don't want to allow blanket permission to anyone whatsoever to do as they please. And besides, we can always ask for permission for a research permit to engage in a cave dig. In the absence of any statement from the Forest Service, what is the basis to believe that such a permit would likely be approved? Speaking hypothetically now, suppose I knew of a blowing lead in a rock collapse at the terminus of a borehole. What if I detected signs here of previous dig activity. If I approached the Forest Service regarding this proposed dig, would they treat this as a crime scene and call out the detectives in pursuit of a criminal prosecution. In other words, is there a risk in even asking for permission?

If the Forest Service actually prosecuted a grotto member for this crime as a felony, how would our membership react to such news? Do we cower in fear lest we ourselves be scrutinized? Are we expected to publicly condemn the "offender"? Do we continue our partnership in so many other areas such as graffiti removal as if nothing had happened?

I believe digging is an essential tool of cave exploring. Even the NSS has a Digging Section, proof positive that digging is a mainstream and non-controversial activity among cavers. I had the great fortune to participate on the dig that opened up Lechuguilla Cave which, as our members know, is widely touted as the world's most beautiful cave. The great success in Fort Stanton Cave and the many miles of virgin passage revealed is another great example of a recent cave dig that resulted in spectacular discoveries including the now world famous Snowy River Passage. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that I am a big believer in cave digging. Could there be a Lechuguilla caliber cave in our local lava beds? Not likely. But just last summer, I visited a cave in Washington State that was recently dug open allowing access to two thousand feet of magnificent virgin borehole. I see no reason that couldn't happen here.

Lastly, what is the Forest Service hoping to accomplish by criminalizing cave exploring and will this policy accomplish their goals? If the goal is to preserve archeological or paleontological resources, would they prefer the organized caving community to conduct digs in consultation with the Forest Service or would it be better to hope that "rogue" cavers honor the ban on digging in the decades to come? Would these unaffiliated cavers even know anything about the ban on digging? In which scenario is it more likely that sensitive resources are reported,

studied, removed and preserved for posterity? Alternatively if the goal is to preserve caves in their virgin state, any geologist knows there are probably far more caves that have no entrance than those that do.

So what do I propose? Simply put, I think we should express our concern regarding the criminalization of cave digging and we should ask for a statement of intent regarding this activity. Does the Forest Service see value in cave exploration for its own sake or not? Do they really intend to prosecute this activity? Is there a risk in even contacting the Forest Service regarding a proposed dig? We need answers.